



# A recipe for success — what highly effective teachers do

*Dr. Jim Mahoney, executive director, Battelle for Kids*

One of my favorite quotes is, “The grass isn’t greener on the other side; it’s greener where you water it.” It follows then that if you want innovation — you water ideas. If you want results — you water expectations. If you want improvement — you water development. It is the latter we must focus on if we hope to really improve the practice of teaching.

In today’s reform-minded world of education, you rarely get an argument that improved teaching is not *a* key or even *the* key to improved student outcomes. However, simply rating teachers with letter grades or often disingenuous labels does little to promote improvement. Do any teachers really aspire to be “Approaching Average” or “Partially Effective,” as some states use to differentiate teacher effectiveness? Can every teacher be great? Probably not. But we can improve the practice of every educator by teaching, promoting and applying the practices and lessons learned from the work of highly effective teachers.

## **What do highly effective teachers do, and can we scale those practices to ensure more students benefit from extraordinary teaching?**

Battelle for Kids has spent the past six years systematically studying the practices of more than 350 highly effective educators in Ohio, Tennessee and Texas who, year after year, have made extraordinary academic gains with kids. We have conducted hundreds of hours of focus groups and in-depth interviews with these educators from urban, suburban and rural settings to discover what they do that contributes to student success.

Developing children’s intellectual capital is not a task that can easily be distilled into five easy steps, or just that “one thing,” as Mitch Robbins, played by **Billy Crystal**, realized at the end of “City Slickers.” Teaching and learning are complex. Battelle for Kids’ goal in researching highly effective educators is not to simplify, but rather make it easier to understand all the factors that go into being a great teacher.

To do that, we began with a model framework developed by Dr. **Robert Quinn** from the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business. The Competing Values Framework (CVF) has been used worldwide for the past three decades to show the tensions that exist in all organizations. Understanding these tensions, while at the same time integrating them coherently, is what accounts for leader and organizational effectiveness. And, like most things in life, it’s a lot easier to describe than to do.

With Quinn’s help, Battelle for Kids has adapted the CVF to develop the BFK•Connect Framework, which identifies and connects the central aspects of great teaching. The framework retains the CVF’s original meanings, but uses terminology that is more relevant to education to illustrate the relationship between four core dimensions of educator effectiveness:

- ▮ Relationships — cultivating a supportive community.
- ▮ High expectations — maximizing every student’s achievement.
- ▮ Continuous improvement — adapting and embracing change.
- ▮ Stable environment — creating structures and processes.

## **Our research shows that highly effective educators successfully integrate practices in all four quadrants to improve student learning. We call this synergy “powerful practice.”**

The BFK•Connect Framework (see chart on page 47) provides a common language to help educators assess their strengths and opportunities for growth relative to these dimensions. The framework also can be used to align actions across multiple levels of the education system — from the classroom, to the school, to the district levels.

**Relationships (yellow)** — The yellow quadrant is about building high-quality relationships with and among students. Educators who are skilled in this area get to know their students’ interests, offer one-on-one support and foster collaboration, respect and a sense of belonging in the classroom. How might this contribute to improved

outcomes? Kids will work harder for someone who shows they genuinely care about their well-being both in and away from school. However, teachers can overuse this strength if they become so focused on developing a caring and nurturing environment that they no longer expect much from their students. You may know a teacher who truly loves kids, but, candidly, the kids don't learn much from them.

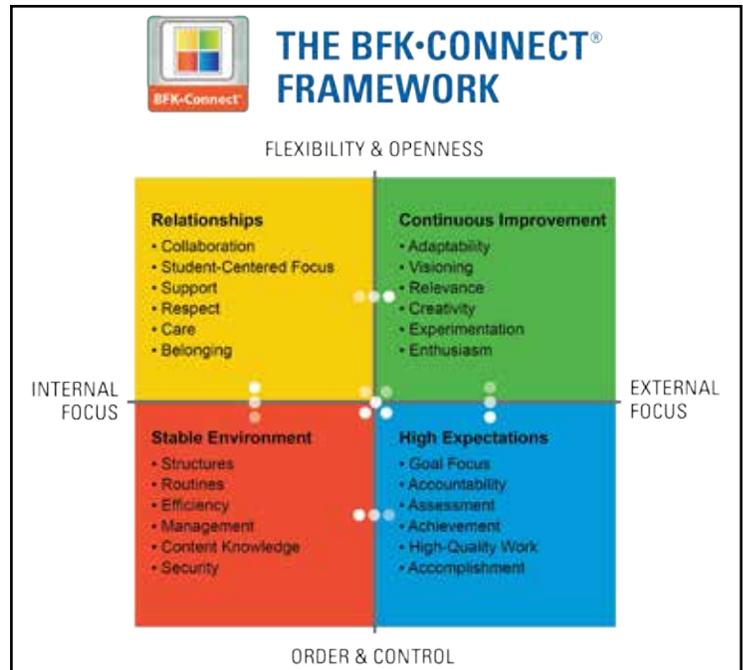
**High expectations (blue)** — The blue quadrant, which embodies high expectations and results, lies across from the yellow quadrant. Teachers with strengths in this area actively help students set goals, hold them accountable and expect high-quality work. They understand that the pain is temporary, but the pride of really demonstrating a new or improved skill or knowledge lasts forever. These teachers care about outcomes and will help students get there through feedback, focus and expectations.

Think of a teacher that really expected more of you than anyone else did. Did you perform better? The answer is likely yes. But, if a teacher overemphasizes results to drive up student achievement, what good does that do if that child never wants to do another math problem? You can easily see how the blue and yellow quadrants could be at odds but, when integrated, become very powerful.

**Stable environment (red)** — The red quadrant is about establishing structures and processes to create a stable learning environment. There has never been a teacher who did not have to figure out classroom management strategies. Routines provide order and security for students about “how things get done in this classroom.” Is there one best way? No. There are a variety of approaches, but certainty and repetition are at the core.

As a student, were you ever with a group of kids whose behavior changed drastically when the only difference was the person at the front of the room? In her new book, *The Smartest Kids in the World*, **Amanda Ripley** concludes that children in high-performing nations take school much more seriously because it is a more serious business in their country. Processes help communicate seriousness and how the business of learning will get done. When students know how they are to behave, outcomes are improved. However, when taken to the extreme, the classroom can become a place where boredom reigns and structured activity is mistaken for accomplishment.

**Continuous improvement (green)** — The green quadrant is about adaptability, creativity and continuous improvement. Educators who are skilled in this area provide students with opportunities to experiment and discover the intended learning for themselves. Kids will work harder for a teacher who provides rich and relevant content presented in an engaging way. At the same time, enthusiasm without goals or some sort of order is like



running full speed at night. It's dangerous. Learning can become chaotic, overzealous and exhausting.

Too much structure or an overemphasis on creativity and experimentation in the classroom can be toxic. But, when red and green practices are integrated successfully, they become powerful complements to accelerate student learning.

If only one word could be used to describe what highly effective teachers do, it would be *integrate*. When educators draw from all four dimensions of the BFK-Connect Framework, they can create an environment — in the classroom, school or district — that fosters a sense of belonging (yellow), accomplishment (blue), security (red) and enthusiasm (green). This is a recipe for success. Think of teaching as a movie and any one day as a snapshot. The one-day snapshot might appear all green or too heavily blue, but the complete movie is a distinct combination of all colors.

Can these skills and practices be further developed in all educators? Absolutely. If we return to the commonly held belief that teachers are the key to student outcomes, we really only have two choices. Either get new teachers or improve the ones we have. My bet is on the latter if we truly hope to provide all students with an education that prepares them for success in college, a career and in life. <sup>8</sup>

*About the author:* Dr. Jim Mahoney is the executive director of Battelle for Kids, a Columbus-based, national, not-for-profit organization that provides strategic counsel and innovative solutions for today's educational improvement challenges. Learn more about the practices of highly effective teachers in the new book, *The Best Teacher in You*, coming in June from Berrett-Koehler Publishers.